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World Heritage: Issues and debates

Abstract

In over thirty years of its existence, World Heritage has proven to be very popular. It attracted the attention of not only the heritage professionals, but also of tourists, the tourism industry and scholars. It seems that as World Heritage was becoming popular among tourists, it was also gaining momentum in scholarly research. Based on an interdisciplinary study undertaken on a global level, this paper explores the issues and debates surrounding World Heritage and its future as seen by heritage professionals rather than the local population, governmental bodies, tourists or the tourism industry. In seeking to include the voices that are often left unheard in scholarly research, this study had a sample of 180 heritage professionals based in 45 countries, all of which were States Parties, signatories to the World Heritage Convention. Each of the 45 countries was represented by a chairman or a highly ranked representative from the IUCN and the ICOMOS, a World Heritage Site manager and a Cultural Attaché. An analysis of their responses to an on-line questionnaire and of the information from semi-structured interviews is presented in this paper. It reveals that among all the existing issues and debates such as the question of the (un)equal representation by geographical region and category and the question of indefinite expansion of the World Heritage List, heritage professionals were also concerned with the phenomenon of the evident growth in popularity of World Heritage among tourists and the issues related to balancing conservation and tourism at existing World Heritage Sites.

Keywords:
World Heritage; UNESCO; tourism; conservation

Introduction

World Heritage had originally been designed as a conservation tool for sites deemed to be of 'outstanding universal value' (UNESCO, 2006a). However, its status was soon to become very popular among tourists (Bandarin, 2005; Evans, 2001; Rakic & Leask, 2006; Shackley, 2006) and the World Heritage related issues thus also attracted great interest of the wider academic community. It seems that, as World Heritage was gaining its popularity among tourists and the tourism industry, it was also gaining its momentum within scholarly research. This growth of attention to World Heritage issues was seen in a number of scholarly journal articles (i.e. Ashworth & van der Aa, 2002; Čaušević & Tomljenović, 2003; Drost, 1996; Fowler, 2000; Rakic & Chambers, forthcoming; Wager, 1995), special issues of academic journals (Tourism Recreation Research, 2001; International Journal of Heritage Studies, 2002; Current Issues in Tourism, 2004; Journal of Heritage Tourism, forthcoming) as well as book chapters (i.e. Hall & Piggin, 2003; Leask & Fyall, 2000), edited books (i.e. Harrison & Hitchcock, 2005 and Leask & Fyall, 2006) and international scholarly conferences

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(i.e. University of North London, 2002; University of Birmingham, 2006). The dominant themes within the scholarly research have been the ones surrounding the issues of tourism management and marketing (i.e. Boyd & Timothy, 2006; Fyall & Rakic, 2006; Hall & Piggin, 2003; Shackley, 2001, 2006), policy and conservation (i.e. Ashworth & van der Aa, 2006; Kavoura, 2001; Rakic & Leask, 2006; van der Aa, 2005) and tourists' understanding of the significance of the World Heritage Site status (i.e. Moscardo, Green & Greenwood, 2001; Smith, 2002). In addition, there have also been studies which looked at the implications of a World Heritage Listing for the local population, such as the study by Evans (2002, p. 117) which addressed the 'realities of living in a World Heritage city', and the one by Čaušević and Tomljenović (2003) which addressed the role a World Heritage Site could have within a city rejuvenation.

Other than in scholarly publications World Heritage Sites were also appearing in popular tourist literature, such as *'The Traveller's Atlas: A Global Guide to Places You Must See in Your Lifetime'* (Man, Schuler, Geoffrey, & Rodgers, 1999) and *'1000 places to See Before You Die: The World's Wonders On and Off the Beaten Track'* (Shultz, 2003). Simultaneously, a quick response to the trends of popularity among tourists and the tourism industry was seen by a number of National Tourist Organisations, where for example, the 2006 Spanish "Smile! You are in Spain" campaign promoted the 'discovery of Spanish World Heritage Cities' (see Spanish Tourist Office, 2006).

Despite the fact that quite a few scholarly studies have been published, there appears to be a paucity of research which attempts to bridge the gap between the two main groups of interested parties: the heritage professionals and the scholars. In an attempt to reveal the main issues and debates surrounding World Heritage and its future and simultaneously address this particular gap, this study includes the voices that are often left unheard: the voices of heritage professionals. Presenting their views within scholarly research was crucial, as heritage professionals are often the key figures involved in conservation, management and promotion of World Heritage Sites.

UNESCO's World Heritage: From conservation to tourism

The idea of creating a World [class of] Heritage was born in the early days after the end of the First World War (UNESCO, 2006b). The actual international convention, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (also known as the World Heritage Convention), was adopted more than 50 years later, at the general conference of UNESCO in 1972 (UNESCO, 2006a). World Heritage was defined as heritage of 'outstanding universal value', criteria strictly defined both in the Convention text and the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2006a; UNESCO, 2005).

Despite the immense significance of heritage conservation in order to preserve heritage for future generations as well as for purposes of visitation (i.e. tourism), until quite recently no international movement existed which would attempt to preserve the most important heritage sites in the world. It is in this sense that UNESCO's World Heritage idea and subsequent conservation work is an admirable attempt despite the problems which eventually developed. As its World Heritage mission states, UNESCO sees to:

- encourage countries to sign the World Heritage Convention and to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage;
- encourage States Parties to the Convention to nominate sites within their national territory for inclusion on the World Heritage List;

- encourage States Parties to establish management plans and set up reporting systems on the state of conservation of their World Heritage sites;
- help States Parties safeguard World Heritage properties by providing technical assistance and professional training;
- provide emergency assistance for World Heritage sites in immediate danger;
- support States Parties' public awareness-building activities for World Heritage conservation;
- encourage participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage;
- encourage international cooperation in the conservation of our world's cultural and natural heritage.

<div align="right">(UNESCO, 2007a)</div>

As hinted in UNESCO's mission statement, the responsibility of conservation of World Heritage Sites lies with various parties, the most common ones being: the local and regional governmental bodies, the national government, regional, national and international heritage conservation bodies, agencies, organisations and local population. UNESCO's role as the key international World Heritage organisation is important not only for inventing the World [class of] Heritage, but also its power of influence, expertise and funding. However, although quite influential, UNESCO has only an advisory role in World Heritage Site management since the Convention does not imply its direct intervention (Hitchock, 2005). The World Heritage work of UNESCO is mainly supported, among other international organisations, by its two main advisory bodies: the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) and the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites).

From the time the Convention was adopted in 1972, until today, World Heritage has proved to be very popular – to date 183 countries have signed the Convention (UNESCO, 2007b) and the World Heritage Committee has approved the inclusion of 830 properties on the World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2007c). Of these 644 properties are cultural, 162 natural and 24 mixed and are located in 138 of the total of 183 countries, signatories to the Convention (UNESCO, 2007c).

Pointing at some of the issues (also identified by authors such as Bianchi & Boniface, 2002; Cleere, 1998; Leask & Fyall, 2000; van der Aa, 2001), a quick look at the figures above allows the observation that 45 countries, States Parties signatories to the Convention, have not as yet had any properties listed as World Heritage. By looking at these figures in more detail it also becomes clear that there is a gap between the cultural and the natural categories of heritage, with an overwhelming 644 properties listed under the cultural and only 162 under the natural category. A somewhat more detailed examination of the geographical spread of World Heritage Sites allows the observation that currently a total of 73 World Heritage Sites are located in Africa, 63 in the Arab States, 167 in Asia and the Pacific, 436 in Europe and North America, and 118 in Latin America and the Caribbean, which is quite an uneven geographical spread.

In an attempt to rectify some of these problems, in 1992 and 1994 respectively, the World Heritage Committee agreed to include the Cultural Landscape category and had launched the Global Strategy for a Balanced, Representative and Credible World Heritage List (World Heritage Committee, 1992; World Heritage Committee, 1994). Both attempts were to assist filling in the evident gaps on the World Heritage List. However, as authors such as Leask & Fyall (2001) and Leask (2006) discuss the

effectiveness of these and other more recent attempts (see IUCN, 2004; ICOMOS, 2004), a straightforward solution to these problems did not seem to exist. To date, the World Heritage List remains unbalanced (see Table 1).

Table 1
GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN 2006

WHS type	Geographical area as ...				
	Africa	Arab States	Asia and the Pacific	Europe and North America	Latin America and the Caribbean
Mixed	2	1	9	10	3
Natural	34	4	45	54	35
Cultural	37	58	113	372	80
TOTAL	73	63	167	436	118

Adding to the issues associated with an 'unbalanced' World Heritage List, due to the fact that the World Heritage Convention never defined a definite number of sites which could be deemed as World Heritage, authors such as Melanie Smith rightly suggest that

...questions should perhaps be raised about the apparently indefinite expansion of the World Heritage List, and the subsequent meaning and significance of WHS [World Heritage Site] status.

(Smith, 2002, p. 137)

It could be argued that there will always be new properties which could be considered for inclusion to the World Heritage List as cultural heritage. However, this is not the case for natural heritage which is of relatively limited nature. Nevertheless, this very 'renewable' nature of cultural heritage category and the unlimited number of sites which could be listed on the World Heritage List suggest several questions that need to be asked. What will happen if the number of World Heritage Sites keeps growing at this pace? Will the whole world eventually become a World Heritage Site? Are the values of the World Heritage List being 'diluted' with every additional property listed? Are the abilities and the powers of UNESCO and its advisory bodies to protect these properties diminishing as a greater number of sites are listed (due to limited expertise and financial support for the conservation work available)?

Finally, in addition to the uneven representation (by geographical region and category) and the question of indefinite expansion of the World Heritage List mentioned above, an issue evident in the existing literature was also the one of popularity of World Heritage among tourists and the tourism industry. As Hall (2001, p. 3) notes: 'World Heritage has long been recognised as having significance for tourism'. Despite of its creation for the purposes of conservation, World Heritage has become so popular among tourists that some scholars are now speaking of the World Heritage Status as a 'brand' (Hall & Piggin, 2003, p. 204) and others speak of it as an authenticity stamp for the heritage tourist or a 'trademark' (Rakic & Leask, 2006, p. 11). In addition, some authors even go as far as to discuss 'the future markets for World Heritage Sites' (Fyall & Rakic, 2006, p. 159) and others to compare the World Heritage Site Status with a 'page 3 girl' (Fowler, 1996, p. 77). The point being made here is that heritage sites, including those that are deemed as World Heritage, are increasingly being commercialised through tourism development (see for example Hewison, 1987 and Walsh, 2002). Evans (2001) makes a remarkably illustrative description of the popularity of World Heritage with tourists by drawing on the belief of UNESCO that it would be a mistake

to assume the List would be considered as an ever-expanding tourist's guide to a wide number of wonders of the world, while in reality, he believed that, World Heritage Sites:

> *…and "wonders" have been become just that, "must see" symbolic attractions in cultural tours and national tourist board marketing, and the World Heritage Site award equivalent of a Michelin guide 5-star rating.*

<div align="right">(Evans, 2001, p. 81)</div>

Nonetheless, tourism and heritage commercialisation for the purposes of tourism development could also be seen as valid reasons for its conservation (Robinson, Evans, Long, Sharpley, & Swarbrooke, 2000).

Methodology

Given the 'global' nature of World Heritage, in attempting to define the issues and debates surrounding World Heritage and its future, it was necessary to undertake a time consuming large-scale global research. As it was unfeasible to include heritage professionals from all the countries signatories to the World Heritage Convention, a total of 45 countries (or just under 25% of all the countries signatories to the World Heritage Convention) were selected depending on their representation on the World Heritage List and divided in three groups of fifteen. The less represented countries were defined as those countries with less than three World Heritage Sites, moderately represented as those with four to seven World Heritage Sites, and finally, well represented countries as those with eight or more World Heritage Sites. The countries were, in geographical terms, relatively evenly spread across the globe and were all signatories to the World Heritage Convention. The 45 countries were represented by a total sample of 180 high profile heritage professionals. To be specific, the heritage professionals representing each country were: a chairman or a highly ranked representative of the IUCN and the ICOMOS, a World Heritage Site manager, and a Cultural Attaché.

The primary data collected was both of quantitative and qualitative nature, while the methods used were an on-line questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The on-line questionnaire based on the issues identified in the existing literature was designed and distributed first, while the semi-structured interviews that followed investigated the issues discovered by the questionnaire further. Distributing the questionnaire was time consuming as this was done according to pre-determined criteria. Namely, prior to distributing the questionnaire a database containing personal details of all the 180 heritage professionals was constructed. It is only then that personalised emails containing the link to the questionnaire were sent to each of the individuals in the sample. In ensuring validity and reliability, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that it was accessible only through the link provided in the personalised email and was not accessible or traceable otherwise. In addition, the questionnaire included a section where the respondents needed to fill in their personal data, which was later matched with the personal data kept in the sample database. Further on, due to geographical distance, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the assistance of the teleconferencing technology and all informants were interviewed from their workplace.

The on-line questionnaire sought to determine the issues and debates surrounding World Heritage and the potential future scenarios of the World Heritage List, as those were seen by the heritage professionals. The actual content of the questionnaire was divided in 4 main sections. Section A requested the personal information such as title, name, occupation and the country of residence of the respondent. Section B focused on issues surrounding the World Heritage Site Status and nomination motivations. Section

C contained questions surrounding the problematics associated with the World Heritage List, and finally, section D contained questions relating to the potential future scenarios of the World Heritage List. The questionnaire comprised of a total of 15 questions, some of which were open-ended.

Responses received were 26 in total, meaning that the response rate was just above 14%. The reason for such a low response is most likely that all the individuals included in the sample (and the database) were very highly ranked professionals, most of which would have a very limited time to spare. Nevertheless, the representation of results obtained from the on-line questionnaire was relatively well distributed by both the country group and by organisation type (see Table 2).

Table 2
QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES BY COUNTRY TYPE AND ORGANISATION

Organization	Country type			
	Well represented countries	Moderately represented countries	Well represented countries	TOTAL
IUCN	3	5	2	10
ICOMOS	2	4	2	8
WHS MANAGERS	4	0	2	6
C. ATTACHE	1	0	1	2
TOTAL	10	9	7	26

The responses came from heritage professionals based in seventeen different countries which represented the three country groups relatively well. Namely, 26.92% of responses reflected the opinions of heritage professionals based in countries less-represented on the World Heritage List which had none to three World Heritage Sites; 34.62% reflected the opinions of heritage professionals based in countries moderately represented with four to seven sites and 38.46% were from those based in the well represented countries with eight or more sites. The responses were less balanced by the type of profession: 7.7% of respondents were Cultural Attachés, 23.1% World Heritage Site Managers, 30.8% were from the ICOMOS, while 38.5% were from the IUCN. The semi-structured interviews were based on the results from the questionnaire and sought to investigate some of the discovered issues and debates further. The interviews were undertaken with five of the twenty six questionnaire respondents. Two interviewees were from the IUCN, two were from the ICOMOS, while one was a World Heritage Site manager. Both the interviewees and the questionnaire respondents were expressing their own personal opinions rather than the official stances of their organisations.

World Heritage and its future: Key issues and debates

Similarly to the structure of the questionnaire, this section will discuss three major thematic areas: 1) the issues surrounding World Heritage Site status and nomination motivations, 2) the problematics associated with the World Heritage List and, 3) the potential future scenarios for the World Heritage List.

Considering the evident growth of popularity of World Heritage with tourists, it should come as no surprise that one of the major issues associated with World Heritage Site Status was believed to be tourism. Namely an overwhelming 92.3% of heritage profes-

sionals thought that the World Heritage Site status had become more important for the purposes of the tourism industry than for conservation. A number of heritage professionals seemed to agree that tourism, as an accompanying phenomenon of the World Heritage Site status, is contributing to faster deterioration of sites. Mr Bonnette (2005) for example, who, at the time of the interview was a Chairman of ICOMOS-Canada, had the view that when a 'spotlight' is put on a site by inscribing it to the List, it is under great danger as it attracts a large number of tourists. Heritage preservation seemed to have a very problematic co-existence with tourism at most World Heritage Sites. This stirred debates over numerous management issues caused by high visitation numbers, such as managing the increased numbers of visitors, finding the balance between conservation and commercialisation of the site, producing and implementing an appropriate management plan and implementing appropriate site monitoring systems. Although all of these were thought to be important management issues, a clear majority of questionnaire respondents (62.9%) thought that the two main heritage management issues after inscription were the ones of finding the balance between conservation and commercialisation of the site and managing the increased number of visitors to the site. Adding to this, the impact of popularity of World Heritage Site status among tourists was believed to be reflected at another level. In the interview, Mr Bonnette (2005) claimed that nominations used to be managed solely by experts who would have a professional look at the nomination. Today, he said, when countries have discovered the popularity of the World Heritage List among tourists, some nominations have become politically linked to governments, creating distortion and a change in the process because the real purpose is tourism. He also added that he believed ICOMOS had gone through and included the sites that were 'obviously World Heritage', and that inscription choices made today are sometimes made at a second level. Linking in to this issues, Mr Bonnette also claimed that often it was not very clear to professionals which of these sites are and which are not of global significance while States Parties are often 'pushing away' their opinions!

Whether or not tourism is a direct consequence of every World Heritage Listing or it is a phenomenon appearing only at some sites, is not certain. What is certain is that some National Tourist Boards, Governments and local stakeholders seem to think tourism is a direct consequence as the number of sites applying for nomination is growing (Peard, 2005; Young, 2005). Therefore, it is interesting that Ms Peard, the Project Officer for World Heritage at the IUCN headquarters in Gland, Switzerland and Dr Young, the Chairman of the ICOMOS-UK claimed that sites applying for nomination are increasingly not meeting the criteria strictly set in the Convention and the Operational Guidelines. Dr Young even added that with nominations being difficult to stop, many sites in the UK had no chance whatsoever (Young, 2005). In other words, a number of applications seem to be made in hope that World Heritage Site status will bring an increased number of visitors to a particular site, rather than for the purpose of conserving a site believed to be of 'outstanding universal value'.

In terms of problematics associated with the World Heritage List such as its indefinite expansion and uneven representation, heritage professionals seemed to be slightly more concerned with the issue of indefinite expansion than of uneven representation. This was so despite the fact that most attempts in rectifying the existing problems were attempting to tackle the issue of representativity. Particularly interesting was the fact that the number of respondents who thought that the historical attempts to rectifying some of the problems associated with the issue of representativity were effective was exactly the same as the number of respondents who thought those had no effect whatsoever (26.9%). 38.5% of the respondents had no opinion. That said, it is possible to

conclude that balanced representation by geographical region and category was proving difficult to achieve. As far as the indefinite expansion of the List was concerned, some respondents to the questionnaire (who will be kept anonymous) thought that there is a great need to introduce more sophisticated nomination regulations. An approved expansion of the List which would also tackle the issue of representation, they claimed, would be a feasible solution as long as rigorous nomination regulations would be introduced, which would limit the number of sites listed afterwards. However, others claimed that they would *"…put the whole world on the List if it could guarantee better protection"* while others in a contrast argued that *"…'diluting' the List can not be a desired way. After all not every village can have a site of global significance!"* Reiterating the strength of the indefinite expansion debate evident in the questionnaire responses, many interviewees emphasised this issue. Dr Skoberne (2005), who at the time of the interview was based in Slovenia as the Assistant to the Director of the IUCN for Central Europe, was concerned with two main dangers. The first danger, in his view, is that through continuous expansion the World Heritage List will include many high quality sites but will become so big that it will be unmanageable. The second danger is that as the List grows in size many sites will be at the bottom end, some not even meeting the criteria, while if it grows too big it might even 'loose its point' (Skoberne, 2005). Similarly, Ms Peard said that the expansion of the World Heritage List should not go on indefinitely and that the credibility of the List is very much linked to this concept. She believed that not as much time should be spent inscribing new sites but managing the existing ones, which would be what, in her view, would ensure the credibility of the List. Her view was indirectly confirmed by another interviewee, a manager of a World Heritage Site (New Lanark in the UK), Dr Arnold. He claimed that the inscription did not imply sufficient funds would be provided for the conservation of the site (Arnold, 2005).

With numerous debates surrounding the impacts of popularity of the World Heritage Site status among tourists, the unbalanced representation by geographical region and category as well as the indefinite expansion, the future of World Heritage and the World Heritage List is difficult to determine. Most heritage professionals did in fact offer their own version of a future scenario. The belief most had in common was that the World Heritage List would keep expanding, never to become 'complete' and that more sophisticated or rigorous measures to get sites listed are needed to ensure 'credibility' and 'representativity' by category and geographical region.

Conclusions

In attempting to address a particular gap in the scholarly World Heritage research, this paper presented a study of issues and debates surrounding World Heritage and its future, as those were seen by heritage professionals. An overview of existing literature pointed out that when the international movement for the protection of heritage of 'outstanding universal value' created the World [category of] Heritage in 1972, the issues and debates which would arise later were not in sight. One of the major issues was that World Heritage, having been created for the purposes of conservation had eventually become more important for the purposes of tourism. World Heritage had emerged as a 'brand' (Hall & Piggin, 2003), a 'trademark' (Rakic & Leask, 2006) and an authenticity stamp for the heritage tourist (ibid).

Following the growth in popularity among tourists and its increasing international significance, World Heritage related research quickly gained momentum in scholarly circles. This resulted in numerous publications in scholarly journals, books and international conferences related with the topic. However, despite the large number of scholarly studies undertaken, there was a dearth of research which would attempt to bridge

the gap between the debates existing among heritage professionals and those in scholarly circles. In addressing this particular gap, this study included a sample of 180 heritage professionals based in 45 countries, each of which was represented by a chairman or a highly ranked representative from the IUCN and the ICOMOS, a World Heritage Site manager and a Cultural Attaché. The analysis of data collected through an on-line questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed three key issues. The first was the issue of unrepresentative nature of the World Heritage List. Despite the numerous attempts made by the World Heritage Committee, the IUCN and the ICOMOS this issue was proving very difficult to resolve. The second was the issue of apparent indefinite expansion of the World Heritage List. Some heritage professionals thought there was a danger that the List might loose it significance and credibility, given its indefinite growth. Finally, the third issue was that of the growing popularity of the World Heritage Site status with tourists and the tourism industry. This popularity was believed to have affected a significant growth in the number of applications for a World Heritage Site status being made for the purposes of tourism development rather than conservation.

What will eventually happen with World Heritage is difficult to predict, given all the complexities and issues involved. What most heritage professionals thought was that the World Heritage List would keep expanding, never to become 'complete' and that more sophisticated or rigorous measures to get sites listed are needed to ensure the 'credibility' and the 'representativity' of the List. However, it cannot be said with certainty if and when the World Heritage List will grow too big, and what will prevail: the need of humanity to preserve these sites for future generations or the need to 'consume' them in present through tourism development. Much will certainly depend on the future strategies of the IUCN, the ICOMOS and the World Heritage Committee as well as on the level of popularity of World Heritage with tourists and the tourism industry. Some solutions, especially in balancing tourism development and the on-going conservation work, might possibly be found through a co-operation between scholars, the tourism industry and heritage professionals.

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